When Christmas Comes to Porto Rico

The Woman's Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U, S. A., One Hundred and Fifty-Six Fifth Ave., New York

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CHRISTMAS! Dazzling fields and hills, trees sparkling with ice, bells ringing their merry measure, as swift sleighs skim over white roads; bright and tingling and stinging air, which it is health and delight to drink in—is not this Christmas?—at least to you happy children of America who live in the country.

When Christmas comes in Porto Rico the air is not bracing and cold, but warm and soft. Roses are everywhere, the gardens gleam with lovely lilies, and are gorgeous with scarlet and

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golden cannas; there are foliage plants of many colors and curious form; on the hillsides brilliant flame trees here and there blaze against the green of other trees, and over all the warm sun shines in this always-summer land.

To Manuela and little Mercedes, José and Arturo these warm and flowery days are just the right thing for Christmas holidays. The children are in a flutter of expectation now. They dearly love celebrations! As they chatter excitedly together in funny-sounding words their bright eyes sparkle and snap, for are not the Christmas dances about to begin?

Among the poorer people in Porto Rico these dances are the first signs of the coming Christmas time. There is to be one to-night at Mercedes' home. When the time comes, burning torches are fastened here and there and in their flaring light the children can see men and women moving back and forth with a queer swaying

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motion, while a man beats time upon the top of a barrel. It is great fun, they think, to go from house to house to watch the dancing.

But the greatest excitement is on "Three Kings' Day." Now, these children and crowds of others are on the street watching for the coming of the procession of "Los tres santos reyes," or, as we should say in English, "The three holy kings." First comes a man carrying a box on his head, following him are other men with queer-looking musical instruments. The procession sometimes stops and Manuela and Mercedes watch breathlessly. Will it stop in front of their house? Good! It does stop.

Arturo holds tight in his brown little hand two very sticky cents. These he gives to the leader of the band. Down from the man's head comes the mysterious box—and lo—one side of it is all glass, and through the glass the eager children can see, inside, images of three

men mounted on horses. A great show! The delighted children think so at any rate. As they press forward to get a good look the men sing a queer song to the accompaniment of the queer looking instruments, and then the procession moves on, and the children will not see these three wise men of the East for a whole year until Christmas comes again.

Other curious things happen, too, in these holidays; they would seem to you not a bit like Christmas. To the Porto Rican children they mean less than they used to, for since their beautiful island has come to be a part of our country the schools of the Woman's Board of Home Missions have brought to them knowledge of the real Christmas.

For weeks before the day really comes, there is delightful bustle of preparation in all these schools. Such practicing of carols! Such memorizing of the lovely Christmas story, and at last, on Christmas morning, such joyous

bringing of gifts for "the poor" —if there can be in Porto Rico any who are poorer than are some of these winsome and lovable little children.

But not all of the children in the Mission Schools are poor. Some come from wealthy families—as we can see if we glance over at the visitors' seats, where merchants and army officers and ministers and dressmakers and washerwomen are all waiting in eager expectancy for the parts to be taken by their children in the beautiful Christmas service.

Manuela and Mercedes, Jose, and earnest little Arturo feel very important and happy, for this year they are to tell the Christmas story. They know it "by heart" and tell it well—the shepherd story—the angels' song—the baby in the manger. And after that the singing of the carols is sweet as sweet can be.

As the last carol dies away there is a kind of stir in the room; the older scholars are very wise

concerning what is coming, but it is all new to our four little friends, and they scarcely breathe from excitement when a silver bell tinkles and the big curtain screening one end of the room begins in some mysterious way to part in the middle and draw to either side. Oh, beautiful! beautiful! – for there, shimmering and shining and sparkling, stands a real Christmas tree of the North - not a summer tree at all, but a splendid Norway spruce whose spicy fragrance soon fills the room.

You should see the delighted children and hear their long-drawn-out expressions of delight. Was there ever such a beautiful sight?

And what amazement and speechless pleasure when each one received a little gift from the dazzling and wonderful tree! After this there is one more song—and the beautiful time is over.

They know now the real story of the "three wise men," and their gifts of precious things to

the little manger-baby, and they know how the baby grew to be a man, strong and brave and gentle, who taught people to be always loving and kind, and who before he went away said to those who had been his friends that they must teach people to do all the things they had learned from him, and that they must love everybody. They know, too, that he loved little children dearly; and it is to please him who was once the baby in the manger that these warm-hearted and loving little children have to-day brought their gifts for "the poor."

Our little friends learned all this and much more when the real Christmas came to Porto Rico.

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